

STI policy in Uruguay: political constraints for developmental project

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A general reform of the STI policy has been executed in Uruguay since 2005. Arguably it is the first explicit national STI policy in the history of the country. It is embedded in a broad developmental vision, which conceives the STI activities as a strategic tool for economic development, and also as a new way to deal with the social inclusion problems deeply rooted in the Uruguayan society.

To address these wide objectives it was necessary an organizational and institutional policy design, which allows: i) to support S&T activities in research institutions; ii) to promote innovation activities in public and private firms of several economic sectors; iii) to develop different actions and incentives oriented to inclusive innovation.

The political and institutional option chosen in Uruguay was called “transversality”. This choice is based on the assumption that the STI objectives should be the responsibility of several public offices and they are not vertically assignable to any particular ministry (Serra 2005; Ardanche 2013). The concept of transversality is an organizational and institutional instrument to promote the pervasiveness of the STI political agenda, which in turn is considered a prerequisite in order to follow a broad STI strategy for national development.

This political option was translated into a new organizational design and into a significant increase of human and economic resources. It implies three major changes: i) the creation of the Cabinet of Innovation, in charge of the elaboration of policies and strategies. It is composed by the ministries related to production (industry and agriculture), education, economics and strategic planning. ii) The modification of the scope of the Science Council, as advisor of the Cabinet of Innovation. III) The creation of the National Agency for Research and Innovation (ANII), as executor of the policies elaborated by the Cabinet.

Our research aims to answer if the institutional and organizational design of the Uruguayan STI policy is suitable to drive the broad STI National strategy. We also analyze in which extent the transversality proposal was implemented. Finally we discuss if the recent institutional reform overcame the legitimacy and effectiveness challenges that the STI policy face.

In order to answer these questions we made a revision of secondary sources (programmatic documents, laws and official reports), we performed our own analysis of national statistical data, and we conducted semi-structured interviews to qualified actors.

We conclude that the implemented transversal design was an original organizational option that could be suitable for the developmental targets. Nevertheless, the transversal model, although reflected in formal institutional redesign, failed to pervade the informal aspects, values and culture of public organizations, which used to work in a isolated way, vertical and hierarchical. Besides, new organizations, like ANII, seem to adopt a similar pattern of traditional government organizations.

Also, the results show that, despite the strong programmatic effort oriented to comprehensive STI policies, the recent changes in the institutional design failed in modifying the supply-side rationale of the main policy tools. An analysis of the programs and instruments implemented by ANII reveals that most of them are classic supply-side programs for research support. Also, the operating budget of ANII shows a strong bias to research projects conducted by academic institutions rather than to innovation projects or activities performed by firms or social organizations.

These results enable us to discuss some challenges that the STI institutions and policies face in Uruguay. Currently, the STI activities and particularly the STI policies were politically reappraised and legitimated because they were embedded in a broad framework that included several goals beyond the scientific and technological progress itself (Bianchi et al. 2013). It is worth bearing in mind that in underdeveloped countries, the STI policies often face big challenges of legitimacy (Arocena and Sutz 2005). The contribution of STI to the national development is not clearly perceived in those countries, neither for most political and social actors nor for the public opinion. Also, STI policies usually remain strongly associated with traditional science policies and used to be seen as a political arena out of social and economic problems. Therefore, the STI policies must to overcome a twofold test: the legitimacy of the STI activities itself, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the policies to promote the diffusion of the STI outcomes beyond the scientific community.

Political science literature has indicated a trade-off between legitimacy and efficiency-effectiveness (Linz 1987. Buquet 2007). Both dimensions interact with each other: a legitimized "political arena" will probably have a quite straightforward path to obtain effective results. Otherwise, to obtain effective results will contribute to strengthen the legitimacy of the political arena.

Our final conclusion states that the concentration on supply-side tools mainly devoted to promote scientific research activities could imply future political restrictions. It means that the relative high political legitimacy of the STI policies could be reduced if these policies are perceived as a matter of a specific community and not as an effective tool for national goals. In short, the institutional design of the STI policy and its concrete implementation may create political constraints for the STI national project.

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